DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 046 913 TE 002 065

AUTHOR Wagner, Geoffrey
TITLE Media and the Teaching of English.
PUB DATE 70
NOTE 4p.
JOURNAL CIT Use of English; v21 n3 p204-207 Spr 1970

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *English Instruction, Films, Instructional Media, *Language, *Literature, *Mass Media, Oral Reading

ABSTRACT

English is made up of literature (the art of letters) and its essential component, language. Media adaptations may make literary works superficially more vivid, but since all such adaptations are divorced from the form of the original, they all differ from the original in important respects. While teachers must point out the significant differences between a literary work and its adaptation in another medium, they must also emphasize their similarity--the vehicle of language. (DD)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

The Use of English, Vol. 21, No. 3, Spring 1970.

ED046913
TE002065

# MEDIA AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH[1]



*by*

GEOFFREY WAGNER
City College of New York

CAN OTHER media help in the teaching of English? The question presupposes agreement on what constitutes a medium, and on what constitutes English. Let me address myself to the second problem first.

Beyond an elementary level the teaching of English is generally obliged to divide into two, language and literature. Where a fairly high level of specialised study is realised, the two are accorded virtually the status of separate faculties, as at many universities; here each division of study has its own tutors, examinations, lectures, and so forth. In the context of contemporary American society, with its pluralistic relationship between the two, the training can be quite toxic to communication.

In the strictest sense literature is the art of letters. By this canon illiterates cannot produce 'literature', and we normally allow that babies, the insane, and sundry simpletons are ineligible for, or unlikely to attain, the Nobel Prize.

In other words, language is an essential of literature, and the proper use of language is innovative, comprising a distinctly human ability to express new thoughts. It is potentially as infinite as literature with the result that the bifurcation mentioned in advanced study is almost certainly unhealthy today—and does not, in fact, prevail at the more enlightened American academies. I will touch on language later.

The case of pre-literate forms (such as the ballad) is sometimes advanced at this point in the pedagogic argument to present literature orally—as if one automatically assists, or 'brings out', a poem by reading it aloud, or witnessing it read aloud on a screen, or in a theatre, or under conditions of a specific dramatic presentation.

But the ballad was a special case and even if the original verbalisation was pre-literate—which, in the case of the Scottish Border Ballads, at least, it almost certainly wasn't—the resultant expression was a *form*.

[1] Based on a paper read at the N.C.T.E. Convention in Milwaukee in November 1968.



Copyright Chatto and Windus 1970.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Chatto and Windus, and author TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

That is to say, it was a determinate composition with certain formal elements and illusions at work (the sense of narrative for one). Moreover, the ballad was certainly committed to *lettera scripta* very soon. Probably as soon as possible.

Most ballads heard today are those sung by folk-rock groups and other popular combos, with the result that the philosophical gremlin of group-produced literature makes its inevitable reappearance. Once more, as it were, we are encouraged to understand that it is the egg that lays the chicken. For even if Homer was a group of Homeric poets, each idea was still an original act of human intelligence, and each composition (even if modified by an audience) was original. Here we reach the second fork of our problem —what is a medium?

If I send my Aunt Agatha a letter, the medium of my communication is script, it is not the postman (as it is for Marshall McLuhan, at least when he chooses it to be so). If I decide to telephone my Aunt Agatha instead, our medium of communication is the spoken word, it is not the telephone—though of course that instrument imposes certain obvious artificialities of discourse. (You can check this by sitting your Aunt Agatha in the next room and shouting through to her.) The category of the communication is still language, words.

In short: writing down a poem, ballad or other literature may be said to alter the medium, but not to change the category. It seems to me that this is an essential to any intelligent classroom work in English. Writing down a poem does not compromise its poeticalness, its 'literariness'—what the Germans call its *Literaturschein*. It simply becomes reading matter.

Dozens of aspiring poets today assume the reverse. Namely: that uttered, declaimed poetry is axiomatically superior to read poetry. And on this basis the teacher is encouraged to haul tape recorder, gramophone, and screen into the classroom in order to 'bring poetry out', to 'put it across', and so on.

Oral poetry may or may not be better than read poetry. Both depend on intrinsic norms. But the printed word is *not* an enemy of the poetic experience. Reading is *not* a substitute for hearing.

Unfortunately the classroom teacher has too little time at his disposal. Even if he agrees with these premises, the nature of his work is such that extra-literary aids insist themselves on him. They make literary works superficially more 'vivid' for the young, and seem to do so more quickly. It is sometimes called 'bringing the past alive'.

Films of Shakespearean drama seem to assist appreciation, and over a short period may produce improved examination answers. But the end product of such an attitude may be a misconception of literature, and indeed a miscarriage—as when today's children (and not only children) grow up

under the suspicion that the written script, drama or novel, is but a mere ancillary, en route for other, higher forms, at the hands of Hollywood.

The role of sound in poetry is complex. A poet may or may not gain by being read aloud. He is not inferior if he does not do so. At least one critic, H. W. Boynton, in a famous article on 'Pace in Reading', went so far as to suggest, 'Outside of poetry there are few forms of literature which are not as well or better off without the interposition of the voice. The reason appears to be that a printed page empowers the ear with a faculty of rapid hearing.'

And when you come to prose fiction, the latest literary art in the West, it can be historically assessed how its aesthetic refined and developed after the establishment and spread of writing. As Susanne Langer has put it, 'Only in writing could prose become an artistic medium at all.' This is exact. The novel was never an oratorical art. It is what it is, a special form evolved by the free use of letters to the plane of art. Writers like Conrad (or Gide, who translated Conrad) dramatized this for us by inserting some narrator at the centre of the fiction. So Conrad's narrator Marlow is not Conrad, his 'I' is not Conrad, just as entire articles have been written to show that Shelley's 'I' in the famous *West Wind* ode is not Shelley.

Let us assume that Conrad's novel before the class is turned into a digest, with supposedly tedious *longueurs* excerpted. It is illustrated. Made into a movie. A play. A television drama. There are Conrad dolls—I treasure the box top of some *Lord Jim* chocolates. These are all progressive divorces from the form of the original, culminating in (or descending to) television, where the form is least enveloping.

This is not to pose media norms—to say that a television drama is worse than a novel. There are many novels worse than many television dramas (though, in Conrad's case, the original medium—the written page—was exploited to express certain shades of experience most tellingly). The teacher is, however, doing his charges the greatest possible service if he makes them aware of both the essential unity of the category at work (language), and of the progressive divorce mentioned. That, in short, the medium is *not* the message. That, in fact, the message is not the message, so far as literary art is concerned. As the saying goes, to send a message you use a telegram. A novel is not what is not a novel. In I. A. Richards' golden words, 'Hulme and the school teachers are forgetting everything that matters most about language in treating it as just a stimulus to visualisation. They think the image fills in the meaning of the word; it is rather the other way about and it is the word which brings in the meaning which the image and its original perception lack.' And this brings us back to language, on which there is only time to be most general.

Language is our method of organising knowledge. I side with anti-empiricists, like Chomsky, reluctant to see language as a learned response to stimuli. The whole of the teaching of English, in England as in America, has been haunted too long by the theory that language is a habit structure, with a certain system of skills, taught by drill. Anything that can be done to dissipate this conception, by the import of other (so-called) media, the better. This is a matter of considerable urgency, as recent student strikes have shown.

Language seems to be an inborn principle of great generative power. Its creative and inventive qualities determine the nature of our experience, and are thus at the heart of the moral ability. Anyone who has worked with children will be aware of this. The comic-book addict is incapable of dealing with life because his literate models of life are false. An understanding of language helps us to understand life.

The late student riots underline this. Everywhere students have been calling for a new curriculum—not simply a less divisive and specialised and technocratic curriculum, but one with a universal conscience. That is the heart of the matter. Somehow or other our teaching programmes have got to accommodate this need, and thus have to recognise—so far as English is concerned—that a property of the language faculty is deeply creative, connected with our most cherished drives and aspirations. And, inasmuch as the child is concerned, it is no less than a moral treasury within which he can, if he wishes, form his future world.